



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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My name is Itsik Lachman. I was born in Poland in the town of Grodzisk Maz on March 6, 1921. My father's name was David Lachman, and my mother's name was Chava Lachman, née Huberman. I had three brothers, and three sisters. The eldest was my sister Esther. Next came another sister Gitel, then a brother Benek, then I followed. After me came my brother Motel, then another brother Eli, and my youngest sister Chasha.

My father was a locksmith. My eldest brother, Berek, worked with my father in a shop located in the kitchen of our home. My mother was a housewife. My sister Esther was married, and had two little girls. My other sister Gitel was also married, but had no children.

When the war broke out on Friday, September 1st, 1939, I was at home. At about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, German planes bombed our town. The planes were returning from a raid on Warsaw which is about 38 kilometers from Grodzisk. The bombs caused a lot of damage, and a great number of people were killed or wounded.

I was a cabinetmaker, and worked in Warsaw. In the evening, I went to night school three times a week to further my education. I worked six days a week commuting everyday to Warsaw, and back. My day started at 5 o'clock in the morning, and I didn't get home before 10:00 PM.

Most of the Jews in Grodzisk were either tailors or shoemakers. A few were merchants. My father was one of two locksmiths in town.

One week after the start of the war, the town afraid of more bombings panicked, and most of its inhabitants, including us, fled to Warsaw. We remained there for five weeks, and lived in my aunt's apartment which was located in the basement, and consisted of a room and a kitchen. There were not any sanitary facilities, and we had to fetch water from the courtyard. All together, eleven people lived in that one room. During that time, the Germans bombed Warsaw day, and night. The town was in flames, and food was scarce. We stood in line a whole night to get a piece of bread in the morning. Most of the time we returned home empty handed.

After five weeks, we decided to return to Grodzisk, and walked all the way because there was not any transportation. When we got to Grodzisk we saw the Germans had already occupied the town. The persecution of the Jews started right after. Orders were given to the Jewish Community. Each family had to provide a person to do manual labor for the Germans. One day, I replaced my sister, and went to remove snow. As there were not enough shovels, I was ordered to remove the snow with my bare hands.

At the end of December, we were ordered to go to the ghetto of Warsaw. Since I was a cabinetmaker, I was allowed to remain in Grodzisk, and worked for the Germans. I remained there for a couple of months, and rejoined my family in the same basement in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Life was unbearable in the ghetto. There was little food, and it was very crowded. Sanitary conditions were non-existent. Sickness was rampant. People were dying by the hundreds everyday. Some people escaped from the ghetto with false papers.

One of my friends by the name of David Bonk, managed to escape to Izbich, and remained there for a few days. When he saw that the Jews there were still free, and that there was food, he got in touch with me, and he asked me to rejoin him. I sold my boots to get the money to buy false papers which allowed me to leave the ghetto. After a couple of days, the Germans started to round up the Jews, and sent them to work camps. A girlfriend of David Bonk found work at a farm, and when she heard that another farmer needed a hand, she got in touch with me, and took me to the farm. The farmer asked

me if I could do farm work. I told him to try me out. After the first day, he told me that he was satisfied with my work, and he asked me to stay. I worked there for three months with no pay, and slept on the floor on a layer of hay. At the end of the three months, an order came from the Germans forbidding Jews to work for Polish farmers. If a Jew was caught at a farm, both the Jew and the farmer would be killed. I returned to Izbich. Two days later, I was arrested by the Germans, and taken to Zamoch.

Zamoch was a work camp. It was a depot for construction material, and the inmates were taken out everyday to do various jobs. One day during lunch, as I was helping out a carpenter, an SS officer walked in, and saw me working. He immediately told me to remain in the camp, and work in the workshop. He took a liking to me, and never harmed me even though he was a ruthless killer. One day, he asked me if I could fix the roof of his house. The roof was very steep, and he observed me from a distance how I worked with a rope tied around my waist so as not to fall. He was pleased with the job, and I was allowed to work indoors. Shortly after, the work camp became a concentration camp guarded by Ukrainian soldiers who were as bad as the German SS. Some of the work in the concentration camp consisted of carrying telephone poles. Three prisoners carried one pole along the road, dropped the pole, and had to run back to pick up another pole under the watchful eyes of an SS who was looking down from a hill ready to shoot the laggards.

During that time, the remaining Jews of Zamoch were rounded up. Many were killed, and survivors were sent to different concentration camps. We were taken out of the camp, and forced to dig a large pit, and bury the dead.

I remained in the concentration camp until a typhus epidemic broke out. I became ill with typhus, and the Germans decided to kill all the sick people. They had a pit ready, and several trucks arrived to load the typhus victims. Some were shot, and some were thrown alive in the pit. The same SS officer who took a liking to me, and who now was in charge of the liquidation of the typhus victims came to the barracks where the sick were held, told me to get dress, go to the shop, and make believe I was working. He, thus, saved my life.

Shortly after, the Germans decided to reduce the size of the concentration camp. They selected 70 prisoners including myself to continue to work in the camp. The others were shipped to unknown destinations. We remained in the camp until the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. I remained in the concentration camp of Zamosh until April 1943. I continued to work as a carpenter. From time to time, we were taken out of the camp to unload telephone poles, and various building material from incoming wagon trains, and load them onto trucks. We were also made to unload trucks. The work was very hard, and we were constantly watched by the SS. Food was scarce, and was on our mind all the time. The meager rations we received barely kept us alive. In the morning we were given a liter of a watery soup. At midday, we got a dark liquid with a slice of moldy bread, and in the evening another liter of a liquid made from chicory. We were hungry all the time, and many of us died from malnutrition, and physical exhaustion.

In April 1943, the camp of Zamosh was closed, and we were transferred to the extermination camp of Majdanek. As soon as we got there, the SS started to brutalize us. We were beaten, and forced to march into a large hall where we were ordered to undress completely. The men were placed on one side, and the women on the other side. We were told to give up anything of value under the threat of death. As we walked through the hall every part of our body was searched including our private parts to see if we had hidden anything. On the way out, we were given prison clothing.

The camp was divided into five sections. The first four sections were for men. The fifth section was for women. My group was assigned to the fourth section, and taken to a barrack. Once inside, we

were given a blanket with stripes, and assigned to a bunk which consisted of three tiers. Each morning, before dawn, we were marched outside for roll call. Sometimes we stood there for several hours until the SS made sure that all the prisoners were present. While this was taking place, the SS entered the barrack, and checked to see if everything was in order. One of their cruel games was to make sure that the stripes of the three blankets of each bunk were lined up properly. If they didn't match precisely, the SS took the name of the offender who was then whipped.

After roll call, we were led to work. We were divided into small groups, and had to walk in step while an orchestra made up of inmates played military marches. The work consisted of various tasks. One day we dug trenches. Next day we collected dead bodies to be disposed of. One day I was selected with a group of seven men to lay pipes in a field. The kapo told us that he wouldn't beat us if we gave him our portion of our daily bread. That day, we didn't have to work very hard, and were not physically mistreated. One day, as I was out in the field putting away tools, a high ranking SS officer watched me from a distance, and saw that I was putting something in my pocket. I had gathered a few wheat kernels. He came over to me, and searched me. When he found the wheat kernels, he showed my head between the spokes of the wheel of a wagon, took my pants down, and whipped me twenty-five times. The pain was unbearable. I was bleeding from the wounds. I couldn't sit for a long time, and had difficulty walking.

I remained in Majdanek till the end of June 1943. Before we left the camp, we were given wooden clogs to wear, and were taken to a railroad where cattle cars were waiting for us. We were very happy to leave this death camp which was a slaughter house. When we left the camp, we were also given five hundred grams of bread with a slice of liverwurst. On the way to the train we were so hungry that the food was gone before we boarded the train.

We traveled around twenty-four hours, and arrived in the slave-labor camp of Birkenau – a satellite of Auschwitz. As soon as we entered the camp we were tattooed with a number, and a triangle on the left forearm. My number was 129423. We were then taken to a barrack, and assigned bunk beds. We were issued new prison clothing, and our wooden clogs were exchanged for shoes which were taken from dead bodies. Most of the underwear was made from prayer shawls. To keep us busy, the guards made us carry stones back and forth, and clean the grounds. Since new transports were arriving at the camp each day, to make room for the new arrivals, selections were conducted every day. The weak and the sick, and those looking sick were directed to the left, and taken to the gas chambers. The healthy looking prisoners were taken to work in different camps.

I remained in Birkenau a couple of days with a few friends from my home town Grodzisk. One day, it was the turn of my barrack for a selection. All the prisoners from my barrack were called out for roll call. An SS doctor surrounded by SS soldiers started the selection. Most of the prisoners were weak from starvation, and were shoved to the left, and taken to the gas chambers. The stronger ones were pushed to the right. When the doctor came up to me he pushed me to the left which meant the gas chambers. When I saw my best friend being pushed to the right, I took a chance knowing I could be shot on the spot walked back to the doctor, and said: "Herr Doctor, I am a carpenter." The doctor said, "we need carpenters", and pushed me to the right. At that moment, I felt like coming back from the dead. The group that made it to the right remained in Birkenau a few more days. Again, we were given a piece of bread, and a slice of salami, and were driven to Jawozna – another satellite camp. I was happy leaving the smell of death which hovered over Birkenau day, and night.

We arrived in the concentration camp Jawozna, and were greeted with a hot bowl of soup, and a piece of bread. After a few days, I was selected to work in a coal mine named Rudolph. I worked the day shift. As long as I did my work, I was left alone inside the mine. The SS guards took us to the elevators, and remained outside the mine. The elevator took us down 150 meters, then we walked down a tunnel to

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the coal ore to a depth of 220 meters. Waking down was comparatively easy. Walking back to the elevator after a day's work was very painful, and uncomfortable because water was dripping from the roof of the shaft which made the ground muddy, and slippery. The bosses in the mine were Polish gentiles whom the Germans trusted with the dynamite. At first my job was to load the wagons with coal. After a while, I got sick, and remained in the camp until I recuperated. I was then sent back to the mine where my job was to send up empty wagons which were filled with coal, and connect one wagon to the other. The conditions were very bad. Water was sipping constantly unto the mine shaft, and I was wet all the time. The daily routine was as follows: around 10 AM, after roll call, we were fed lunch which consisted of one liter of soup, and 500 grams of bread, and taken to the mines by truck. We left the mine around 11 PM, and got back to the camp after midnight. For supper, we received a cup of cold liquid made from chicory. I was hungry all the time. I managed to get a little extra soup by sweeping the barracks, and emptying the garbage at the dump. One day, I found pieces of beets, and carrots thrown out from the kitchen of the SS. I spent a little more time picking through the garbage, and missed roll call by a few minutes. An SS guard caught me, and struck me with an electric wire.

I continued to work in the mine until January 17, 1945. On that day, at twelve midnight, several SS officers went down the mine, and ordered us to stop working. When we reached the surface, they told us to take a shower, and we were taken back to the barracks. We didn't go to sleep, and were ordered to remain outside for an "appel" a roll call. We waited until all the inmates were assembled, and started to march in the direction of Blechamer, a town in Germany. We walked for four days in the blistering cold of winter. We walked in threes. The one in the middle rested while the other two supported him. That way, we took turns. One night, we slept in the snow. My hometown friend and I bundled up together. We placed one blanket on the snow, and covered ourselves with the other one. The blankets were thin, and we shivered all night. Finally, when daybreak came, the SS appeared, and ordered us to assemble, and the march continued. We finally reached Blechamer, and no sooner we got there, the SS disappeared. Before they left, they burned down several barracks where we had taken refuge. Many died. After a few days, we realized that they were no Germans in sight, and we started to organize ourselves. We found a warehouse with food, and started to cook on makeshift stoves which we build with bricks.

We remained there for a few days. Then, one night, we heard banging on the doors of the barracks, and heard voices screaming "auf machen" open up. These were Germans soldiers who were fleeing the Russians. The Germans took us out, and ordered us to march. We marched until our strength gave out. Bodies from a previous march were lining the road. Those who could not keep up were summarily shot. Those who were a bit stronger helped the weaker ones. The shoes we had were worn out, and many walked barefooted, some with rags wrapped around their feet. We finally reached a railroad where cattle cars were waiting. We were given a piece of bread, and a slice of liverwurst, and taken to Buchenwald.

Buchenwald was an international concentration camp. There were prisoners from all over Europe. Upon arriving in the camp, the German guards gave tickets good for some soup, and a slice of bread. We were taken to a barrack, and fifteen of us were assigned to a bunk. We slept top-to-tail. In the middle of the night, we were attacked by some Ukrainian prisoners who robbed us of our food tickets. They were vicious, and strangled those who resisted them.

We remained in Buchenwald a few days. Again, we were given a piece of bread, and a slice of salami, and made to walk back to the cattle cars. They took us to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. We stayed there a few days, and again we got a piece of bread, and a thin slice of liverwurst, and marched to cattle cars. The destination was the concentration camp of Allach. We were taken to empty barracks. With pieces of wood we made makeshift beds. We remained in Allach several weeks,

and again were herded into cattle cars. Each car was filled with forty or more men. Each of us was given a paper sack in which to sleep. Our transport was destined to be gassed. The cars roamed aimlessly day, and night. The train stopped from time to time so that we could relieve ourselves. We were able to quench our thirst by eating snow. Some managed to catch frogs, and insects, and eat them alive. We were not given any food. Many died from sickness, and starvation. I became very ill, and wanted to be taken to an infirmary wagon which was attached to the cattle cars, but my hometown friend prevented me from going there because no one ever came out alive from it.

Then, one day, we saw American planes, and heard loud explosions. The German guards made us get off the cars so that the planes could see our striped prisoner's garb, and would not bomb us. Some of the guards said that we were better off than they were because they knew that punishment awaited them. The guards vanished when the American soldiers started to appear. Some of us started to run to greet them, and were accidentally shot.

We were free at last. Soon after, the Red Cross arrived, and distributed packages of food -- sardines, crackers, chocolate, and other delicacies which we had not seen in five years.

We were left on our own, and decided to go to Staltach, a small town in Germany. It was a ghost town, its inhabitants having fled to the countryside. I entered a house where the owner, an old woman was still living in it. With two other men from our group, I spent the night there. In the morning, we went out looking for food, and clothing. We found a butcher shop packed with food, and ate all day long. Several days later, I became ill from overeating. The three of us remained with the old woman for about a month. Then one day, the UNRA came with trucks, and took us to Feldafing, a DP camp (displaced person camp). We registered with the authorities. Everybody got a pair of pyjamas of the same color, and assigned to a room with three tier bunks. Life got back to somewhat normal. I got a job in the DP camp as a locksmith. I didn't get paid, but I got extra rations for my work.

The happiest day of my life came when accidentally I met my future wife Lola. We got married shortly after. The second happiest event of my life came with the birth of our three sons, David, Herbert, and Charles.

I omitted a lot of details, some too painful to tell, some I have forgotten.

That I came out alive from this inferno, and write about it, is a miracle in itself. I still have nightmares where I see myself being selected to the gas chamber. I live, but the pain, and the suffering I endured is still with me.

P. S. THIS IS ONLY A SMALL PART OF WHAT I
WENT THROUGH.

MEMORIAL

Ceremonies in memory of the 18,000 Jewish victims of mass execution, the biggest ever carried out by the Germans in the Majdanek extermination camp 59 years ago, have been held at the site of the camp, located outside of Lublin, Poland.

The mass murder was carried out at the camp by special German S.S. and police units on November 3, 1943.